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SUBJECT: VLAAMS BELANG: FLANDERS' FAR RIGHT PARTY LOOKS INWARD IN A GLOBAL WORLD

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Classified By: Charge Wayne Bush for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Far Right Vlaams Belang (VB) is campaigning hard in the run-up to the June 7 regional and European elections. The most notable slogans since the campaign began on March 7 are "Flemish Money in Flemish Hands" and "This is Our Land." These slogans are meant to conjure the VB's goal of an independent Flanders. However, the VB is better known, or more notorious perhaps, for its call to halt immigration and vocal opposition to the Islamization of Europe. The party's platform states that immigrants must integrate and accept certain tenets of Western civilization: freedom of speech, separation of church and state, and equality between men and women. The VB platform calls for an end to the recognition of Islam as an official religion, the closing of mosques that preach against Western society, and an end to government subsidies for mosques. The VB has been isolated by the majority political parties at the national and regional level by a "cordon sanitaire;" the cordon parties have promised not to join the VB in a government or partner on legislative initiatives. VB President Bruno Valkeniers told Pol-Econ Counselor he had worked hard to modernize the party and was adamant that it was not racist. He argued the cordon sanitaire was based on fear of the VB's Flemish independence stance rather than racism. He said the VB did not need to participate in government, since it was in fact committed to the abolition of Belgium. End Summary.

VB's Conservative Electoral Campaign and Right Wing Platform

¶2. (C) The VB is running as a conservative, right-wing Flemish independence party in the June 7, 2007 regional and European elections. The most noticeable campaign slogans used by the VB are "Flemish Money in Flemish Hands" and "This Is Our Land" for the European campaign. In February the VB handed out small yellow piggy banks with the Flemish money slogan at rallies as part of this campaign. Broadly, the VB is campaigning as a traditional, conservative, almost anti-modern party. Like many conservative parties in other countries, it is focused on "the traditional family and traditional values", a rejection of multiculturalism, and in this election opposes globalization as well. The platform for the Flemish campaign lists several very conservative goals with inherent critiques on modern Belgian society.

¶3. (C) INDEPENDENCE: The first item on the platform is "Flanders by Its Own Might." The VB makes a broad critique of what it terms a failed Belgian state, the transfer of funds from wealthier Flanders to Wallonia, and the current Flemish government headed by Christian Democrat (CD&V) Kris Peeters. The VB views the compromises required by the Belgian constitution as a handicap that impedes Flanders' ability to succeed. (Note: the Belgian constitution requires super majorities--2/3rds--in many cases and allows the Francophone and Flemish Communities to use a safeguard clause to block national legislation deemed threatening to a community's interests. Half of all ministers must be Francophone, even though there are more Flemish held seats in Parliament and a Flemish majority in the population. End Note.) From this perspective, leaders of the major Francophone parties are portrayed as enemies of Flanders. The argument then follows that this unfair governmental arrangement supports the transfer of EUR 2,000 per year per Fleming to what are portrayed as lazy Walloons. The piggy banks and the "Flemish Money" slogan are meant to drive this point home. A variation on the piggy bank now appearing in campaign publications shows the coin slot of the piggy zipped shut, with the red Walloon rooster's foot caught in the zipper. Strong criticism is laid on the Peeters government, and on its failure to achieve a state reform that would provide greater autonomy to Flanders in several areas. The VB offers the catch-all solution of an independent Flanders separate from Wallonia and its status quo politicians. A strong, powerful Flanders would be free to seek its own way in the world.

¶4. (C) TRADITIONAL VALUES: This campaign season the VB has distributed campaign publications in support of the "traditional family" and "traditional values," an issue often heard in U.S. elections. The party's platform calls for more generous social policies for traditional families with children, but also attacks Belgium's more liberal, "less

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Christian" policies. The VB held a "Family Day" in Antwerp to highlight its support for the family; its "this is our land" brochures and posters are also part of the family values campaign. One of the articles in the VB's April 2009 party paper provided testimony from a Fleming who said he would no longer vote for the CD&V, because it is no longer a Christian party. His testimony said he would vote for the VB, the only party upholding truly Christian positions and opposed to Belgium's gay marriage law, abortion, and multiculturalism. Flemish Parliament VB leader Filip De Winter observed in THE STANDAARD that, "A white, heterosexual, law abiding Fleming on our territory is a modern Job in our society. If he also smokes, drives a car, and votes for the Vlaams Belang, then he is treated as a pariah."

¶5. (C) ANTI-IMMIGRATION AND ANTI-Islamization: The VB is probably best known, or most notorious, for its anti-immigration and anti-Islamization stance. The VB platform calls for the strictest immigration policy of the Flemish parties--an immediate stop "of the flow." The party's platform declares that Flanders is not an immigrant country, but softens this statement with a willingness to accept immigrants who accept Flemish cultural norms and Western values, which include the separation of church and state, democracy, free speech, and equality between men and women. The VB openly points out that Islamic immigration is the greatest threat to these values, and some party publications call Islamization a threat to European society. A brochure distributed in Brussels in February focused on the expansion of mosques in the Brussels region; the front cover read, "No Super Mosque in Molenbeek." The VB platform calls for an end to the recognition of Islam as an official religion by the state, the closing of mosques that preach against Western society, and an end to government subsidies for mosques. The most publicized statements have been made

by De Winter, who recently wrote a book titled "Inch'sallah," in which he likens Islam to a predator preying on a weak European civilization. In media interviews De Winter said he was not opposed to Muslims, but only to those who practice an Islam counter to standard Western values. A Muslim community leader in Antwerp recently told Poloff that VB rhetoric is often mentioned within the Muslim community as a sign of Flemish hostility and intolerance.

¶6. (C) ANTI-GLOBALIZATION: The most recent VB campaign statements (late April) have focused on the financial crisis and globalization. The VB now espouses an anti-globalist policy. This would seem to fit with the views of a truly conservative party, holding up the idea of an independent and isolationist Flanders, ignoring the fact that Flanders is an open economy dependent on world trade and foreign investment.

The VB European election program indicates the VB is also opposed to a stronger European Union and espouses a loose federation of nation-states over the present structure that allows larger countries to direct EU policy.

Relations with Other Parties: Cordon Sanitaire

¶7. (C) Though the VB is the largest party in the Flemish regional government and holds a large number of seats in the national parliament, it has been subject to a cordon sanitaire by other parties at the regional and national levels. The governing parties a long-standing agreement not to join governments or partner on legislation with the VB. Poloff spoke to representatives of the CD&V, the OpenVLD, and the Flemish Socialists (sp.a) to ask whether they would continue the cordon sanitaire if the VB does well on June 7. The CD&V foreign policy advisor said the CD&V would stick to the cordon sanitaire principle and long-standing policy; there has not been and will not be discussion of a policy change. A younger CD&V member serving in the Cabinet of Flemish Minister President Peeters said the VB's recent rhetoric and campaign slogans may appear more moderate, but he believed no major party, including the CD&V, would adjust its policy for electoral reasons. He predicted any party breaking the cordon would face unwelcome publicity and be accused of intolerance by rival parties. An OpenVLD contact said the principle of the cordon would remain. He said the VB had tried to moderate its image over the past five to six years, but the core of racist supporters remained the same. When pressed for evidence, he mentioned De Winter's book. The sp.a Vice President said that a social-democratic party

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could never work with a right-wing party with racist roots. He admitted the VB had stopped its radical right-wing rhetoric in 2003, but predicted its return during the regional campaign due to tough competition from the new center-right Lijst Dedecker (LDD). He suggested the VB's recent outreach to the Jewish community and its support of Israel was an obvious ploy to project a more tolerant image. When I asked about the party's recent leadership changes, he pointed to the party founders' connection to collaborators during WWII and an extreme-right party in the 50s. Filip De Winter he claimed was once a member of a right-wing national socialist youth movement. He said he was uncertain if moderate VB President Bruno Valkeniers had a racist history.

Bruno Valkeniers: The Moderate Public Face

¶8. (C) VB President Bruno Valkeniers described his party as a legitimate, non-racist, right-wing Flemish nationalist opposition party during a discussion with Pol-Econ Counselor February 13. Valkeniers has a business background, previously managing terminal operations at the Port of Antwerp followed by several years of independent consulting. Three years ago, Valkeniers was approached by the VB and asked to enter politics. He said he was a well-known sympathizer from the Flemish movement and had regular contact

with the parties associated with Flemish independence: the VB, the New Flemish Alliance (NVA), and the nationalist wing of the CD&V.

¶19. (C) Valkeniers stated clearly that the VB's main purpose is to achieve an independent Flanders within the European Union. He predicted Belgium would eventually become too bloated, reaching a point where important decisions would be impossible to make. Valkeniers rejected the NVA approach of working from within the government. The Belgian constitution's restrictions force too many weak compromises and prevent the Flemish majority from promoting its own interests. Regarding the two commonly mentioned obstacles to splitting Belgium--the national debt and Brussels--Valkeniers suggested dividing debt by territory, GDP, or some other formula. He agreed Brussels was the greater challenge, but suggested that Brussels should be viewed as an international multicultural city rather than a Flemish or Walloon city. He described Brussels as a dirty, filthy, rough city with serious socio-economic problems. Noting that it could not survive financially either alone or in union with Wallonia, he suggested two possibilities: a special multi-lingual entity within mono-lingual Flanders or a distinct entity like Washington, D.C., supported by Flanders, Wallonia, and the E.U.

¶110. (C) As a member of the Flemish movement during the years of Flemish cultural and political awakening (1960s-1980s), Valkeniers placed a strong emphasis on the VB's pursuit of a Flemish identity--"leefbaarheid," or viability for Flemish cultural norms. He said Flanders was an open, European part of the world that claimed respect for itself and others. The VB is uncompromising on its insistence that all residents of Flanders must respect Flemish culture and language. The VB therefore expects immigrants to integrate and accept the common language, values, and culture that have evolved in Flanders over centuries. He added that immigration was not a problem until the 80s and 90s, when large waves of immigrants came from the developing world. Islamic immigration, he said, presents the greatest challenge due to the seriously different cultural perspective held by Muslim immigrants. He said the key cultural points of Islam that were abhorrent to a free European people were the differing status accorded men and women and the unity of politics and religion espoused by Islam. The problem was not religion, he added, but the mix of religion, politics, and juridical practices.

Not a Racist Party

¶11. (C) Valkeniers categorically denied that the VB was a racist party. After referring to the 2004 decision by Belgium's highest court that effectively forced the disbanding of the VB's predecessor, the Vlaams Blok, for allegedly violating anti-racism laws, he pointedly remarked that freedom of speech standards were not as high in Belgium as in the U.S. As party president, Valkeniers is striving to revamp the VB image and improve its political discourse.

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Pol-Econ Counselor asked about recent inflammatory statements from Filip De Winter. Valkeniers replied that a political party must deliver a political message, and De Winter often communicated in a "direct" manner. He also commented that De Winter's more moderate statements rarely make headlines; the press seems to ignore or overlook De Winter's frequently made point that the VB has no problem with religion and is not trying to ban Islam or the Koran. Valkeniers also argued that the racist card is used as an excuse to isolate the VB, when the real issue is the majority parties are scared of the VB's true commitment to abolishing Belgium.

¶112. (C) Valkeniers said it was this fear that led to the cordon sanitaire pact maintained by the other parties. He said the cordon held when the cameras were running, but was weaker behind the scenes. As an uncompromising party,

however, the VB does not need to take part in governments. He said that twenty years ago Flemish independence was a marginal idea for marginal people, and is now taken seriously. When asked about his party's prospects in the upcoming regional elections, Valkeniers admitted to concern about competition from the new LDD for the right-wing vote and NVA for the nationalist vote. He dismissed LDD leader Jean-Marie Dedecker as a short-term attention grabber who wanted to participate in government. The NVA, on the other hand, was too academic and intellectual, and sought an intellectual's calm, compromising, and slow time frame for independence. The fact that NVA had to end its coalition with the CD&V in the previous government highlighted the impossibility of working within the system. VB voters, he said, were simple people, for whom the Belgian government is the enemy, the occupier of Flanders.

Comment--Post Will Continue Minimal Contact Policy

¶13. (C) The VB is the most conservative and right-wing party in Flanders, if not in Belgium as a whole. It is the most likely choice of right-wing Flemings and those afraid of immigration and concerned with the growth of the Muslim population in Europe. Because of its anti-Islamization stance and the intolerance attributed to some of its members, it is deeply unpopular in Belgium's Muslim community, and shunned by other parties. The UK Ambassador told Charge that the UK maintains a no-contact policy with the VB. VB member are not invited to Embassy events, and Belgian parliamentary delegations that include a VB member are not received by the UK government if they visit the UK. This is similar to long standing U.S. Embassy practice. Absent Department guidance to the contrary, post plans to maintain a single, mid-level point of contact with the VB.

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